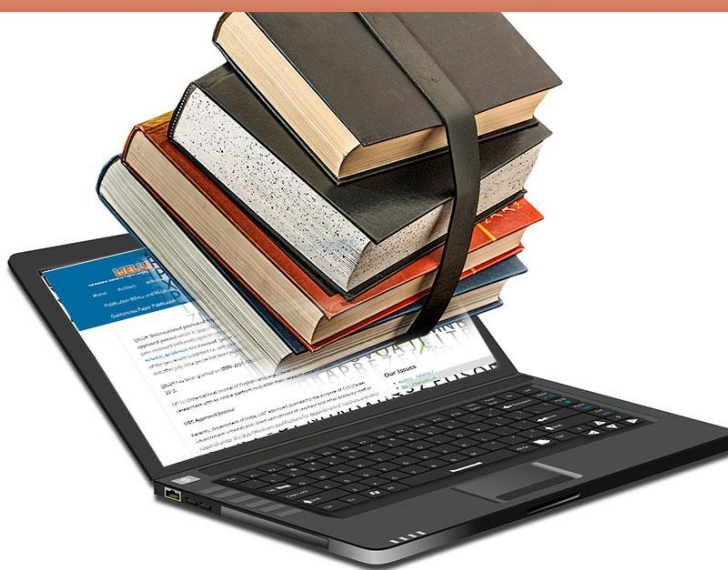


ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

Aby Abraham

Research Scholar

Dept. of English and Comparative Literature

Central University of Kerala, Kasaragod, India

aby1016@gmail.com

Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Abstract

Photography was the result of evolution of human being's constant attempts to preserve his/her memories across the history. Walter Benjamin believed that the mechanical reproduction of a work of art could bring about the democratisation of art, making the existing art forms accessible to the public through photography and photography as an art form. Benjamin understood photography as the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction and its potential in the true democratisation process. Ideally the evolution of digital reproduction should have further made the artefacts accessible to public and made the work of art more democratised. The paper will be looking at the evolution of photographs as artefacts in the era of mobile photography and new media.

Keywords: Photography, digital reproduction, artefacts, aura.

Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction

Photography was the result of human being's constant attempts to preserve his/her memories across the history. According to Andre Bazin and Hugh Gray, "if the plastic arts were put under psychoanalysis, the practice of embalming the dead might turn out to be a fundamental factor in their creation" (4). Bazin and Gray talk about 'Mummy complex', the

continuous attempt of human beings to overcome death, which they thought could be ensured through continued existence of corporeal body, led to the origins of painting and sculpture. They note that overcoming time satisfied the psychological need of overcoming death and humans tried many methods to do so (5).

Bazin and Gray notice that in Pyramids, near Sarcophagus, there were terracotta statuettes as substitute mummies, which were kept to replace the mummies if they got ruined. They note that across the history there were attempts to make tools to overcome death and progressing from one device to another so that humans can preserve themselves embalmed making them available to another location of time (6).

Photography was the answer to this continuing quest for an ultimate representational model. According to Bazin and Gray, photographic image was the final device in this progress which satisfied the deep need of humans to 'preserve' themselves. "The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it" (8).

This evolution of photography not only had huge impact on the memory process but also in the way artefacts were received. In the essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" Walter Benjamin talks about how the mechanical reproduction enabled various artefacts to reach far audience. Before photography, artefacts were accessible only to a special sect of people who had access to certain spaces; he uses the examples of the statues of gods which are situated at the sanctum sanctorum where only certain people can go in. Mechanical reproduction enabled the artefacts to reach to new audiences without affecting the 'original'. Art has been kept away from the common mass across the centuries, at the most 'sacred' spaces of spirituality, or the 'temples' of high art. According to Benjamin, "the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition". This uniqueness gives a special status to the work of art, which Benjamin calls 'aura' (6).

Benjamin believed that mechanical reproduction of work of art could bring about the democratisation of art, making the existing art forms accessible to the public through photography and photography as an art form. Benjamin understood photography as the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction and the potential of it for the true democratisation process. Photography was the first form of art where the concept of an 'original' was overturned. Because of the potential of a negative to produce any number of copies, the unique existence of 'original' was questioned for the first time (6-7).

With the introduction of digital technology in photography, this form was further revolutionised. There was no need for a negative and an infinite number of copies of the same photograph is possible without any hassle. Owing to the widespread reach of the internet and the emergence of social media sites, sharing images became easy. After the introduction of mobile photography, capturing photographs and sharing it became a social norm and response to any event by people across the world.

Even though Benjamin considered the evolution of photography as democratisation of art, the means of production did not necessarily provide the equality. Even if someone owned a camera during the early days of photography, the means of reproduction of these images at a mass level, printing and the access to galleries were handled by the upper strata of the society and this small portion of elites decided what images people had access to.

In these circumstances, the evolution of digital photography and later that of the social media networks could have been the perfect opportunity to break the monopoly of media houses governed by specific goals of dominant groups across the world. Ideally, the emergence of social media, along with other new media could have revolutionised the photographic production and made it easy for the common public both in terms of production and reception of photographs. But it is important to check whether this infinite flow of image production

further dismissed the 'aura' associated with the artefacts or reinforced the 'aura' associated with it.

In terms of lack of means of reproduction to the common masses, the evolution of social media can be considered as the solution. Social media started with the evolution of personal blogs and expanded to social media networking sites like Orkut and Facebook opening up a new era of publishing services to those who were kept away from dominant media structures. Now both the means of production, say cameras and the platforms of showcasing these productions are accessible to a huge population who have mobile cameras and internet and now social networking sites are flooded with images produced from different parts of the world. For example, in 2016, Instagram, a popular image sharing website claimed to have 95 million photos shared daily by its users (Reuters, web).

On February 4, 2017, a popular news website *The Newsminute* brought out an article about some popular visual artists in South India including the likes of Harshini Vakkalanka, Sheela Gowda, Bose Krishnamachari, TV Santhosh, Krishnaraj Chonat, Abhishek Hazra, Prabhavathi Meppayil, Srinivasa Prasad, Anup Mathew Thomas, Navin Thomas and Avinash Veeraraghavan etc (The News Minute, web). Interestingly, many of them use photography as their main form of expression, but you hardly see any photographic productions of these artists with the news article here. Even when you search the works of these artists online, you can hardly find any of their productions online. The only information you get are the details of exhibitions they have conducted, likes of Kochi-Muzuris Biennale and other exclusive gallery spaces, but nothing online. It is important to note the lack of access to the work of someone who works with photographic medium in an era where everything is supposed to be at your fingertips. What makes a photographer keep his/her artistic expressions exclusive to certain spaces when she/he can easily reach to millions of people online through platforms which act as online galleries.

Benjamin talks about two kinds of value attached to artefacts. Cult value and exhibition value. Cult value refers to value of an artefact produced with in the provision of an exclusive cult. Here the production is created for specific spaces for exclusive purposes and those rituals associated with these spaces give the value to the production. Where exhibition value is associated with an object which are exhibited to public. Here the value is decided by the contents of a particular artistic expression which can accessed and analysed by all. According to Benjamin, "In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line. But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography" (7).

Here, with the digital reproduction of photography instead of shredding off the aura associated with the artefacts, controlled access to certain photographs provides a certain 'aura' to these photographs. It is not just that the lack of access to certain productions guarantee this aura, rather the flooding of photographic productions online makes a perfect platform of creating aura for these photographs. Artefact which is available exclusive to particular spaces itself creates a certain value. Here the aura is this exclusiveness, where one can access these photographs only through their access to specific spaces determined by various socio-economic standards. Here the 'cult value', which could have been lost through the availability to tools which make the work of art available to public, is claimed by certain artefacts which are exclusive to certain spaces.

Along with this, the copyright laws and other controlling mechanisms like restriction of cameras in gallery spaces, further restricted the mobility of these artefacts. Also, the contemporary practices of photographic productions which involve collaboration of other forms of artistic genres make the materiality of the photographs and the space where it is reproduced very important and this further put extra value to the way it is exhibited.

In conclusion, the continuous flow of photographic productions through new media ensures 'aura' to those work of art which are exclusive to certain spaces. This makes way for the re-emergence of high art and low art where we tend to attach value, the cult-value in Benjamin's terms to those exclusive artefacts which can be accessed thorough certain spaces. Here those images which are available easily, or can be accessed easily become the low-art and those images which are exclusive become the high-art. This is no way to undermine the exhibition value of these artefacts, this shows that the chances of reproduction are not a conclusive necessity for the dominance of exhibition value over cult value, rather it may allow those who have exclusive access to certain spaces to grant value to certain artefacts by restricting its access in an otherwise crowded artistic production.

Works Cited

- Bazin, Andre and Hugh Gray. "The Ontology of the Photographic Image." *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1960): 4-9. PDF.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Arendt, Hannah. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 1969. 1-25. Print .
- Reuters. "Instagram's user base grows to more than 500 million." 21 June 2016. *Reuters*. Website. 12 December 2018. <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-instagram-users/instagrams-user-base-grows-to-more-than-500-million-idUSKCN0Z71LN>>.
- The News Minute. "Art without limits: The contemporary South Indian artists you should know." 4 February 2017. *The News Minute*. Website. 12 January 2019. <<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/art-without-limits-contemporary-south-indian-artists-you-should-know-56773>>.